MORALITIES - OLD AND NEW

June 23, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Mark 2:23-3:6

"...Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" -Mark 3:4 (NRSV)

Time was when keeping the Sabbath was a matter of very major significance. In the motion picture, "Chariots of Fire," Scottish sprinter, Eric Liddell, refuses to run an event in the Olympic Games for which he has trained and competed with everything in him, because it is scheduled for Sunday. It won't be long until people will no longer know what that's about. We have, a Presbyterian scholar, Benton Johnson observes, dropped the subject of Sabbath Observance altogether.

But there was a time, not so very long ago, when what one did or refrained from doing on Sunday, was thought to have major moral significance. Sunday activities were restricted by law not so long ago. I recall the heated debate which occurred when movie theaters were finally allowed to open on Sunday.

But mostly I recall with a fair amount of dread, what it was like on a hot summer Sunday afternoon.

The rules were unwritten but clear nevertheless. Anything fun was suspect. My own family was not overly pious so my oppression was not nearly as thorough and religiously mandated as my chums' who were confined to the front porch, in their Sunday clothes, and allowed only to read books. Even Monopoly was forbidden. I can even recall the signal we had to indicate that their parents had dozed and that it was safe for me to bring them the comics from our Sunday paper. I suppose the frivolity was regarded as offensive to God. Or maybe it was the color. Our rules seemed to have something to do with exertion and perspiration. Bicycle riding was allowed, but basketball was not.

There was a time when the name "Presbyterian," both in Scotland and in this country, was synonymous with stern sobriety and, in particular, with Sabbath rules which seemed to have no point except the suppression of joy and spontaneity. The celebrated agnostic, Robert Ingersoll, was raised a Presbyterian and despised the denomination all his life. "No church has done more to fill the world with gloom than the Presbyterian," he said.

[see Benton Johnson, On Dropping the Subject: Presbyterians and Sabbath Observance in The Presbyterian Predicament, p. 91]

Forty years after my Sunday confinement I have come to appreciate the notion of a Sabbath, a sacred time different from all other time. But from the time I first thought about it until the present, I have known that there is something missing from a religion whose focus is obeying rules and that there is something not adequate about a definition of morality which focuses exclusively on not doing particular activities. I became something of a situationist, an advocate of what would later be called the New Morality, that is to say, at the age of ten, suffering through hot Sunday afternoons. But I continue to believe the broader topic of what constitutes moral behavior and who defines what is and is not moral is a consistent motif in the life of Jesus.

The relationship of keeping the Sabbath according to the rules, and a living faith in Jesus Christ, is a provocative microcosm of a very relevant issue.

Early in his public ministry, Jesus bumped into the legalistic morality of the Scribes and Pharisees and the issue, which seems innocent enough, was the Sabbath. It's the Fourth Commandment - "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God: You shall not do any work."

Now there is unassailable wisdom here. We know that time away from work makes us healthier and happier and better workers. We know that a sabbatical is a time of creativity and refreshment and that its result is often professional longevity and effectiveness. We know the wisdom of a rhythm between labor and rest.

And it can be argued that a society requires something approximating that rhythm as well. To live here, on this vortex of hyperactivity, is at times to long for the confinement of the front porch!

Anna Quindlon wrote a wonderful editorial last week, "Suddenly No Summer," which lamented the passing of summer's traditional lazy emptiness.

> "Summer isn't what it used to be," she wrote. "Children are never allowed to be bored. Boredom was once the backbone of summer - long afternoons spent gazing sightlessly into the depths of the refrigerator, complaining in a high voice, 'There's nothing to do': Sir Issac Newton, Leonardo daVinci, Frank Lloyd Wright - I am convinced that they began to germinate their most important theories during summer vacation, over Kool Aid and a comic, taking a break from tormenting their younger brother."

Parents are terrified of boredom, she observed, because they think it leads to drugs, sex, and low SAT scores. So children go to camp to get stimulated. Her parents' idea of stimulation was a trip to the Dairy Queen once a week.

Summer, she concludes, is the time children need, when nothing much should happen. [New York Times, 6/16/91]

There is ancient and contemporary wisdom in the notion that there is time different from all other time, a time to be kept holy and distinct, a time which in a very real sense redeems the rest of the time. The notion of a Sabbath, some have suggested, abandoned totally by the church during the last generation, should be revisited and revived for the general health and well being of our culture.

Keeping the Sabbath holy, not working on the Sabbath, was one of the foundations of society in Jesus' day. That being the case, the keepers of religious traditions, people identified in the Gospels as Pharisees and Scribes, defined Sabbath and what constituted work on the Sabbath and what keeping it holy meant so carefully that there were pages upon pages of Sabbath rules and exceptions to the rules. Inevitably, obeying the rules, keeping the Sabbath according to prescription, came to be the way people defined themselves as faithful, and when Jesus challenged that, not so much by what he said, as by the way he lived, he stirred up a lot of trouble.

Walking through a grain field one day his disciples plucked a few kernels and ate them. Six days a week that was allowed. Hungry travelers were permitted to help themselves. But on the Sabbath, hungry or not, the act of picking and plucking out the kernel technically ran into the prohibition against Sabbath harvesting and threshing. So the Pharisees - criticized..." Why do you allow your disciples to violate sacred law?" Jesus' response was to cite an occasion when King David did the same and worse, a comparison the Pharisees surely found presumptuous, and then added a telling caveat, that the purpose of Sabbath was the welfare of people. "The Sabbath is ours. We are not the Sabbath's," he said.

When he entered a Synagogue they were watching him to see if he would further violate the law. And there is a sense in which the mood changes radically as Jesus enters the Synagogue and sees the Pharisees following him, watching, and sees the people inside, common people, reading and praying. What happens next is, in fact, an act of defiant civil disobedience. There is no urgent need such as hunger to warrant what he did. There is a man with a withered hand - his hand had been deformed from birth. His need was not immediate. He had lived with his condition all his life. It would be the same in the morning. The man didn't come to the Synagogue to be healed, at lease consciously: He knows that healing is forbidden on the Sabbath. He doesn't ask for anything. It's Jesus who takes the initiative - addressed the man who I assume was simply sitting there in the congregation minding his own business, participating in the reading and the praying. "Stand up," Jesus said. "Come here" - shattering the peace of the Sabbath service. Turning on them, the ones who had earlier raised the Sabbath issue, he said: "Is it lawful to do good or harm, to save life or to kill on the Sabbath?" The silence was deafening now and, Mark says, "he looked at them with anger, at their hardness of heart," which one scholar translates "obstinate stupidity." "Stretch out your hand," he said, and the hand was restored. The law was broken deliberately. And to document the fact that what transpired is no trivial discussion of peculiar religious rules, Mark tells us the Pharisees left

the Synagogue and went directly to intimate friends of Herod, The Herodians, people with whom they had absolutely nothing in common except their fear of Jesus, to discuss ways to get rid of him.

It would seem at first like a bit of an overreaction, until you understand that people always become very upset when someone questions their moral certainties. Nothing, it seems, makes us more nervous.

There is a frequently quoted passage in The Brothers Karamazov, Dostoevski's great novel. Jesus has returned to earth and has been arrested. In the dark of night the Grand Inquisitor visits him in his cell to tell him that what people want is security, not freedom. "If you really love people," he argues, "you will make them happy, not free. People want law, not responsibility." Christ, he says, must not start again all that old business about freedom and grace and commitment and responsibility. "Let things be: let the church with its laws handle them. Will Jesus please go away." [see Ethics in a Permissive Society, William Barclay]

Anglican Joseph Fletcher set off a storm of controversy with his book, The New Morality, Situation Ethics. Fletcher argued that Christian behavior is always situational, that God calls us to be responsible and free and faithful and that there are no rules which consistently prescribe what that might look like; and furthermore, to insist on the moral certainty of rules is to miss the responsibility to be faithful and obedient in each situation. Fletcher and others suggested that a disciple of Jesus brings to every ethical quandary - not a neat rule - but the Scriptures, the traditions of the church, the great commandment of Jesus to love God and neighbor and self, and the particularities of the situation.

It sounded to many people as if the advocates of a new morality were promoting moral laxness and relativity, a baptizing of the secular notion that "if it feels good, do it." Just as it seemed to the Pharisees that Jesus was promoting moral laxness. Nothing could be further from the truth, of course.

What Jesus did was to teach that moral behavior is always situational, always new, and that faithful discipleship requires individual responsibility. His law was simple - love God and neighbor as self. So when he sees a man with a withered hand he heals him, even though that means breaking a venerable religious law. Love is the law: people are important: human life is the supreme value.

Think of the trouble we have with that. The Presbyterian report on Human Sexuality prompted enormous hostility and fear by its approach to the moral complexity of life in the 1990s. Many people were convinced that the report was fatally flawed by suggesting that there is more that must be said about responsible sexual behavior than "don't do it." It made the fairly obvious observation that the simple rule - no sex outside of marriage - doesn't begin to deal with the complexities of modern life and the reality of abusive sex inside marriage, for instance. And while we may not agree at all with the recommendations the report makes, I believe it is a critical matter for the church to continue the discussion in the new moral situation ahead of us.

In the meantime, the weight of tradition is heavy indeed. The issues are difficult; people of faith disagree; but on them they are precisely the situations in which Christian faith has a word to say. No one wishes to promote abortion as a primary method of birth control. But as of the Supreme Court decision last month, we are in the ironic and, I believe, cruel situation where a thirteen-year-old who has been brutalized and raped by her mother's boyfriend and goes to a government funded clinic because she is pregnant must be told, when she inquires about terminating the pregnancy, that "abortion is not an appropriate method of family planning."

She already lives in a country whose existing policy extends freedom of choice to people with enough money to receive private medical attention, but denies choices to people who must rely on the county hospital for health care.

No one wishes to promote indiscriminate sexual relations, but the reality is that because of a combination of complex contemporary inconsistencies we are doing just that. In thirty years the percentage of births to unmarried mothers has risen from 5% to 25%. In the Afro-American community, 62% of the babies born this year do not have fathers who are married to their mothers. There are enormous social consequences. Yet we persist in arguing about the availability of birth control and welfare laws which actually encourage absentee fathers, in the name of someone's notion of traditional morality.

Jesus forced the issue of a moral system which had become bankrupt, a system incapable of doing good because it was so busy avoiding evil. He did it eloquently in an act of genuine love and caring. He did it because he encountered human need. That is how we are called to live... on the basis of an old morality which is always new, always responsive to the new realities of the world in which we are living.

It is not easy. In fact, it is very demanding to be responsible. It is the greatest challenge confronting us - to be faithful to Jesus and responsive to our world. What we have going for us is the assurance that he calls us to be responsible and forgives us when we make mistakes. What we have going for us is the example of his life.

I discovered the clue to interpreting this incident in the Gospel of Mark, not in a New Testament commentary, but in Robert Coles book, The Spiritual Life of Children. The noted Harvard psychiatrist had asked children to talk about their religious feeling and to draw pictures. Henrietta, a nine-year-old black girl from Boston, drew Jesus healing a blind man. Coles asked what she thought Jesus was saying and feeling when he did this healing. "He sings a little song," Henrietta replied. "When Jesus saw someone in trouble, his heart skipped a beat." [p. 178, 179]

Typically when we discuss that topic, or think about any of the many incidents in the New Testament which have Jesus in conflict with religious legalism, we identify with the Pharisees.

Our inclination is to focus on the dynamic between Jesus and his critics to see if we are reflected in the moralism and self-righteousness

of the Pharisees, to engage in a little self-criticism, guilt and moral determination, to be less rigid and more Christ-like.

But when all is said and done, the one for whom Jesus precipitated the crisis, for whom he took on the religious establishment was the nameless man with a withered hand. Let's not forget him. He's the point. And maybe he is the mirror in which you are reflected, not the Pharisees. Maybe your situation is not moral certainty and rigid moralism so much as a week-in and week-out sitting there in the pew, waiting, feeling a little inadequate, participating in the rituals of your religion but certain that your limitations, your theological amateurism, your spiritual inexperience; maybe even your moral lapses, keep you on the outside looking in. Perhaps you are assuming that someday - not today - he will make you whole, will love you and accept you and restore you.

The good word here, ultimately, is that Jesus Christ is not the author of a new list of rules, but the incarnation of God's love, that he wants us to be instruments of that love, which is always new, in the world. But first, he seeks you out - finds you; sees your withered hand - your withered spirit - his heart skips a beat and he says, "Come here, stand up, be whole."

The Good News of the Gospel of Christ is that you - your wholeness, your peace, your salvation - are the point of it all, and the reason for which he lived and died.

Thanks be to God.

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Eternal and loving God, as we struggle with ways to be faithful and try to make decisions that reflect your gracious love, strengthen us. O God, our world is complex and there are times when we long for simplicty and certainty.

Stand with us: give us courage to be responsible. Forgive us when we fail and remind us always of your love for us and for all your children, in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.